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# YOSEMITTE NATURE NOTES

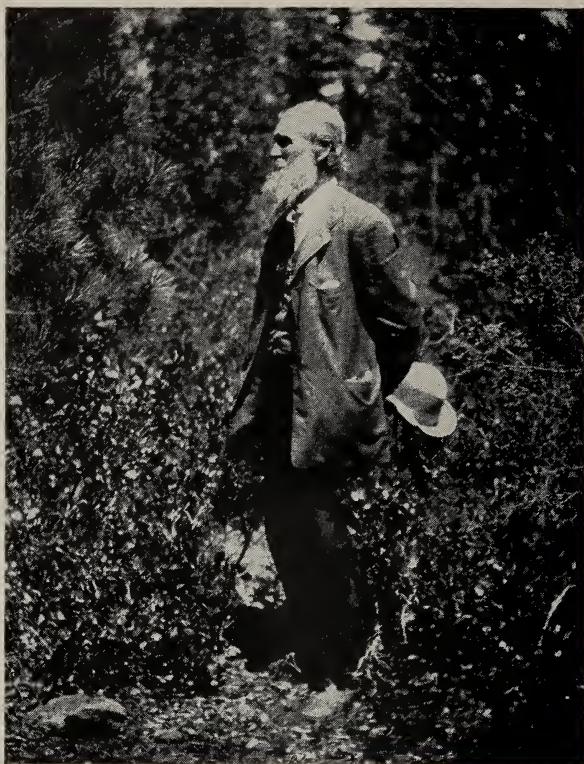
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VOLUME XXXIV · NUMBER 11

NOVEMBER 1955



*Mariposa Grove, Winter*  
—Ralph Anderson



JOHN MUIR

The National Park Service is interested in building up the Yosemite Museum collections of historic photographs, diaries, and other objects pertinent to Yosemite. Any correspondence regarding donations should be addressed to the Park Naturalist, Yosemite National Park, California. The Yosemite Natural History Association has frequent calls for back issues of *Yosemite Nature Notes* from libraries and others interested in complete sets. Any issues from 1922 to 1950 will be gratefully received.

# Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF

THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DIVISION AND  
THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, INC.

John C. Preston, Superintendent  
D. H. Hubbard, Assoc. Park Naturalist

D. E. McHenry, Park Naturalist  
W. W. Bryant, Asst. Park Naturalist

W. C. Bullard, Junior Park Naturalist

VOL. XXXIV

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## ROOSEVELT AND MUIR - CONSERVATIONISTS

By Richard J. Hertesveldt, Ranger-naturalist

In May 1903, Yosemite National Park was host to a little-known meeting between President Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir, the famous naturalist. This unusual meeting of two great conservationists had a strong influence upon the formulation in our government's land and resources policy. It was during this great era of accomplishments that the term *conservation* came into its present meaning.

The prelude to this meeting began a few years earlier when forests which had been set aside by Presidents Harrison and Cleveland were endangered by pressure from commercial interests who wanted the Congress to release them from Federal control. To John Muir, through his vivid writings, goes much of the credit for preventing the passage of such legislation. President McKinley devoted a large portion of his time to the management of the unpopular Spanish American War and too little attention was given to land and resource legislation. Through the political maneuvering of his opponents in New York, Governor Theodore Roosevelt was elevated to the vice-presidency in an effort to stem the rash of anti-monopolistic legislation he was proposing.

Meanwhile, the opponents of Federally-owned forests were making headway. In a letter to his friend C. S. Sargent, a renowned tree expert, Muir wrote, "In the excitement and din of this confounded war, the silent trees stand a poor show for justice." But things changed. On September 6, 1901, President McKinley was assassinated; on the same day Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as President of the United States.



Few men have entered the office of President with more enthusiasm than did Teddy Roosevelt. As an outdoorsman, he had a wonderful insight to problems of land management, many of which were solved during his administration. He felt that "-- conservation of natural resources is the fundamental problem." He continued, "Unless we solve that problem it will avail us little to solve all others." Seeing that forests, grazing lands and watersheds were in danger of impoverishment by exploiters, he and his able forester, Gifford Pinchot, began steering the nation conservation-wise by tightening Federal control over such lands. The President became interested in the conservation attitudes of John Muir by reading Muir's enthusiastic writings. He indicated to the famed naturalist through California Senator Chester Rowell that he desired to make a trip to Yosemite for the express purpose of "talking conservation" with him.

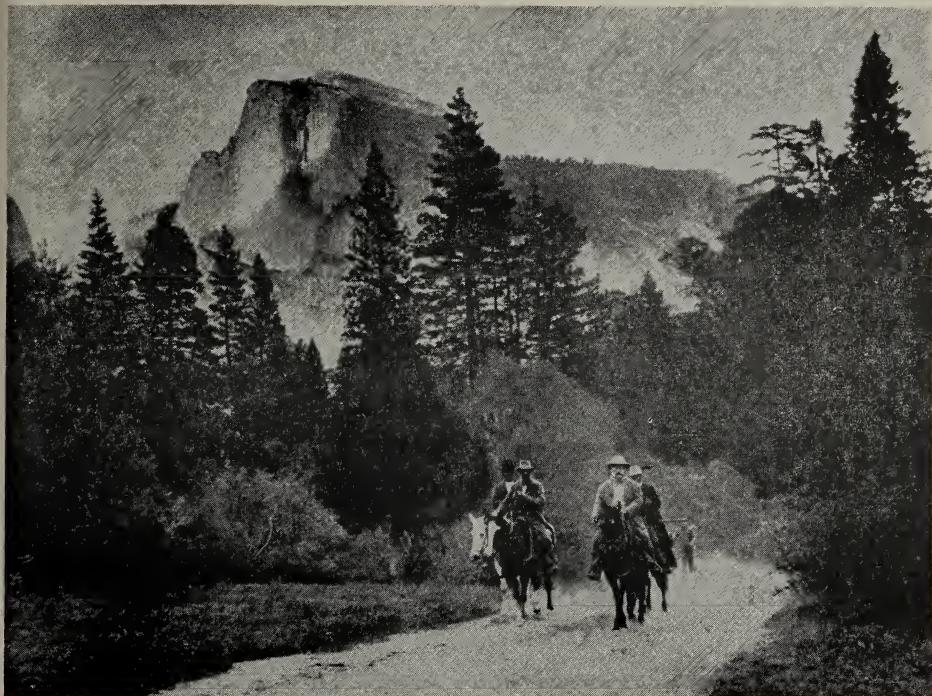
Muir must have been thrilled at the prospects of a visit by the President, although he did not so express himself. After receiving a personal letter from Roosevelt, we wrote to C. S. Sargent postponing their sailing date for Europe and the Orient, saying, "An influential man from Washington wants to make a trip into the Sierra with me, and I might be able to do some forest good in freely talking around the campfire." *Some forest good* was putting it mildly!

Roosevelt arrived dressed for the business at hand in his rough hunting clothes. He and Muir left the main party of dignitaries and slept on the ground at night, once in the snow, which delighted the President. (See "We'll Pitch Camp at Bridalveil" by Ralph Anderson, *Yosemite Nature Notes*, Vol. XXX, May 1951, pp 43-46.) The conversations around

their Sierra campfires would probably fill several volumes, since both were prolific talkers. Although we shall never know all that transpired on this memorial outing, there is much evidence of the good which resulted from it. John Muir was emphatic about the need for legislation to prevent archeological ruins from being destroyed by "pot hunters" and other collectors. The Petrified Forest and the Grand Canyon were foremost among specific areas mentioned. Perhaps it was at this time that the two conceived a workable plan which would vest the President with the necessary power to set apart as national monuments areas deemed nationally significant. The purpose was, of course, to save time when areas were in immediate danger of invasion, and also to circumvent opposition in Congress which might prevent many such areas from being established. The legislation was enacted in 1906 and is known today as the Antiquities Act.

Under various preemption acts, the public could obtain land cheaply or without actual cost. Intended to facilitate settlement of our new nation, these acts lent themselves beautifully to fraudulent practices. Muir told the President of certain lumbering interests in California's redwood forests which would engage sailors on incoming ships to file for the legal amount of redwood forest land and then immediately deed the land to the company which paid them \$50. for their trouble. This, and several other fraudulent practices which were brought to Roosevelt's attention accentuated his already determined opinion that action had to be taken as quickly as possible.

With the President's visit began a friendship with Muir that was carried on by mail though the years. T.R. had doubtlessly had a "bully



President Roosevelt's saddle party riding down Yosemite Valley near the end of their Camping trip in the high country. The first night was spent near the Sunset Tree in the Mariposa Grove, the second camp was made near Sentinel Dome following a long hard day's ride through snowdrifts and an afternoon fighting a raging blizzard. This photo was made on the third day, the skies still overcast. Left to right are Ranger Charles Leidig, John Muir, President Roosevelt and Ranger Archie Leonard. Following behind are a few of the hundreds of visitors who flocked to Yosemite in order to catch a glimpse of the popular President.

*Southern Pacific Railroad*

good time" camping in Yosemite. He wrote Muir years later that he wished that once again they could camp underneath the sequoias.

En route to Washington the President stopped in Sacramento and in a speech, prevailed upon the citizens of this state to do all in their power to use their forests and streams wisely, to preserve the natural wealth. He ended, "We are not building this country for a day. It is to last through the ages."

Back at the White House, Roosevelt attacked the many problems with renewed vigor. Not only his own staff was moved by his courageous attack on the misuse of our

natural resources, but the public caught the enthusiastic approach to this real problem. It was through such loyal support that he won battle after battle against an almost violent opposition of moneyed commercial interests.

During his administration, which ended in March 1909, Mesa Verde, Platt, Wind cave and Crater Lake were established as national parks. Having elected the areas to be established as national monuments while on his outing in Yosemite, he waited only for their boundary descriptions before signing the proclamations which withdrew them from public entry. The establishment of

Grand Canyon as a park had long been the subject of debate. As far back as the Benjamin Harrison administration efforts had been made to establish it as a national park. Selfish interests succeeded in preventing it. Now, with the power to proclaim lands as monuments in the public interest, Roosevelt in 1908 set aside some 800,000 acres as Grand Canyon National Monument. Congress later gave it a national park status.

Park areas set aside during the Roosevelt era included: Chaco Canyon, New Mexico; Devils Tower, Wyoming; El Morro, New Mexico; Gila Cliff Dwellings, New Mexico; Jewel Cave, South Dakota; Montezuma Castle, Arizona; Muir Woods, California; Natural Bridges, Utah; Navajo, Arizona; Pinnacles, California; Tonto, Arizona; Petrified Forest, Arizona; Tumacacori, Arizona, and Lassen Peak and Cinder Cone, California (now Lassen Volcanic National Park).

Conservation of our natural resources became a major part of Roosevelt's activities. The monopolistic misuses of lands acquired from public domain largely came to an end. Land uses, some with great resentment, were required to pay for the privilege of that use. Even the enemies of this historic change had to admit its benefit to the country at large. The tide had turned. In May 1908, the President called the Conference of Governors at the White House. Governors of every state and territory, the Cabinet, the Supreme Court justices and numerous senators and representatives were invited to discuss what TR considered to be the greatest problem confronting the nation. He must have thought it of utmost importance to have called the governors away from their jobs all at once. The conference was unique and the President gained world-wide prestige because of it.

Here, in a time of plenty, he was calling the nation to look ahead and plan wisely for the continuous use of the rich resources. As a result of this conference nearly every state established a conservation commission.

From this evolved the National Conservation Commission which carried on its activities mainly on TR spirit, since there was little or no money for its operation. In 1909, Roosevelt initiated the North American Conservation Conference, inviting Canada, Newfoundland and Mexico to participate in a discussion of common resource problems. A world wide conference was proposed and was to be held at the Hague, Netherlands. However, it never materialized because of a lesser interest in conservation on the part of his successor, William Howard Taft. Among his other great accomplishments was the formulation of the Inland Waterways Commission which was instrumental in showing the close relationship between forests and water flow. Waterway development became a scientific and intelligent business for the first time. Mineral and oil lands were saved from exploitation. The Division of Forestry under Gifford Pinchot was greatly strengthened and 148 million acres of forest land was given national forest status. During the Roosevelt administration 234 million acres of land were withdrawn from private entry, to be managed for the benefit of the American people.

The amount that John Muir influenced Teddy Roosevelt's subsequent courageous actions in behalf of the public is as intangible as is the value of Yosemite's famous scenery. Few will deny that the value was great. The people of the United States will long reap the benefits of a program which was strongly encouraged around their campfires in Yosemite National Park.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE NATIONAL PARK IDEA IN AMERICA

A Condensation by Douglas H. Hubbard  
Associate Park Naturalist

## Part 2

"Henry Thoreau . . . wrote:

'Why should not we . . . have our national preserves . . . in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be civilized off the face of the earth . . . for inspiration and our true re-creation? Or should we, like villains, grub them all up for poaching on our own national domains?'

"The romance of travel was being discovered by a steadily increasing throng. Sarah J. Hale, the publisher of *Godey's Magazine*, felt that 'circumstances had almost inevitably designed us as a nation of travellers.'

"But the West beyond the Rockies was not yet accessible to . . . leisurely travel. We may conclude, however, that the attitude toward nature had changed enough since colonial days to allow Americans to welcome easier access to the West when it should come . . .

## III. Origin of the Park Idea

"Neither the poet's love of nature and the artist's interest in its esthetic qualities, nor improvements in transportation and the citizen's demand for recreational facilities need have produced the scenic park. But if these forces did not produce it, did the park movement, then, originate in Congress? . . .

"Even some years after the Yellowstone Act had been approved in 1872, many in Congress expressed concern about this new 'asset.' To them it would have been better to have sold the area as other public lands had been sold. After all was it not 'a very expensive luxury.' The Federal Government was not supposed to go into 'show business' nor

was it supposed to 'raise wild animals.' With such objections on record we may be rather sure that the park idea did not originate in Congress. Curiously enough, even Frederick Law Olmsted [this name is important] when he tried—to discover the origin of public parks in this country, had to give up—in all likelihood because he had been too close to the problem all his life. He said only that it did not seem to come as a direct 'result of any of the great inventions or discoveries of the country,' but that it probably had been 'a spontaneous movement of that sort which we conveniently refer to as the 'genius of civilization' . . .'

To a limited degree there had been 'public' parks in this country since the beginning of colonization. When Penn laid out the original plan of Philadelphia he assigned for public use a number of squares, the largest of which had measured ten acres. These were to be graced with trees and not to be built over, except perhaps with a few public buildings. Likewise there were 'commons' such as those in England in most of the New England settlements . . .

"It seems a logical sequence that we should find that William Cullen Bryant was the first to advocate a public park in New York that would be on a scale which up to that time had been unheard of . . .

"The proposal . . . [for what was to become Central Park] was well accepted, and in 1851 the first act was passed authorizing the acquisition of the necessary lands. The appointment of Frederick Law Olmsted

as a superintendent of the project initiated a new era in the best possible way. After some years of fruitful work in establishing this park, Olmsted disagreed with Park authorities. He gave up his position in May 1863, and accepted another as superintendent of the mining estates of General Fremont, in Mariposa. In the light of Yosemite's later role, this shifting of Olmsted's position from New York to Mariposa must be regarded as a most fortunate coincidence.

#### IV. The Idea Grows

"Even after the first excitement over the California Gold Rush had died down, the East learned little about the beauty spots of the newly acquired territory of California. None but the hardiest traveler, and certainly no 'tourist' would have been willing to stand the overland trek or either of the wearisome routes by sea. It is significant that one of the first big news stories to come out of California that was not concerned with gold was a show-business stunt. In 1852 the Calaveras Grove of Big Trees was discovered. The next year, two unscrupulous businessmen, George Gale and a companion, stripped one of the Big Trees, the 'Mother of the Forest,' 315 feet in height and 61 feet in circumference, up to the height of 116 feet, and shipped the bark East for a show in some of the seaboard cities, and then at the Crystal Palace exhibition in Sydenham, London, in 1854 . . . The show turned out to be unsuccessful since owing to the immensity of the circumference, nobody would believe that the bark had come from one tree, and finally, being branded as a humbug, the exhibition had to be ended." While this was going on in London, the



Frederick Law Olmsted

widely read *Gleason's Pictorial* published a protest by a Californian to whom it seemed a 'cruel idea, a perfect desecration to cut down such a splendid tree . . . in Europe such a natural production would have been cherished and protected by law; but in this money-making-go-ahead community, thirty or forty thousand dollars are paid for it and the purchaser chops it down and ships it off for a shilling show. We hope that no one will conceive the idea of purchasing Niagara Falls for the same purpose . . . ' Another strong protest was raised in 1857 by James Russell Lowell, who became editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in the same year. His article on 'Humanity to Trees' proposed to establish a society for the prevention of cruelty to trees, since 'we are wanton in the destruction of trees as we are barbarous in our treatment of them . . . ' However trifling the incident may seem to us now, it aroused a

great deal of sentiment in the East, and caused people to ponder their duty of protecting nature against the vandalism of enterprising business-men. At the same time it undoubtedly stimulated great interest in the wonders of California.

"The great event in California discoveries, i.e. the opening up of the Yosemite was publicized with much less fanfare than the Calaveras tree murder. The account in the *Daily Alta California* about the scenic wonders of the valley discovered by the punitive expeditionary force of 1851 against the 'Yosemitos' Indians created no stir outside the state. An article published in the *Mariposa Gazette* of July 12, 1855, by James M. Hutchings, whose activities from then on were to be dedi-

cated to the valley, was of broader interest. Real recognition in the East came in 1856, when the *Country Gentleman* published an article by the *California Christian Advocate* which declared the 'Yo-hem-i-ty' valley to be 'the most striking natural wonder on the Pacific' and predicted that it would ultimately become a place of great resort. Hutchings started his *California Magazine* in the same year and gave Yosemite good publicity in it. In 1855 and 1856 a California pioneer artist, Thomas A. Ayres, made his first sketches at the valley; some of these were lithographed and spread widely over the East. With such nation-wide publicity the fame of Yosemite was bound to grow year by year.

*(To be continued)*



## GIN FLAT

By Lloyd Brubaker, Ranger Naturalist

A great number of Yosemite visitors each year pass a small sign just to the east of the Crane Flat Ranger Station on the Tioga Road. The sign says simply, "Gin Flat". No doubt a great many smiles are generated while speculating over some of the possibilities of such an interesting name. Conflicting stories, or the lack of stories, led me to investigate some of the early history of this charming meadow and its tumble down cabins.

Scattered all through the High Sierra are meadows, lush and green in the summer, covered with deep snow in the winter. The cattle and sheepmen used these meadows as pasture in the summers, and large

herds or flocks roamed the region before Yosemite became a park. These meadows became known as flats, since most of the rest of the surrounding country was largely very steep and hilly.

In the early days, prior to the early 1880's, a man by the name of Hugh Mundy held his summer headquarters at Gin Flat, storing provisions there for his sheepmen. In 1882 John Curtin established his cow camp at Gin Flat, patenting the land along about this time. His son, John Barry Curtin (later a state senator) and a friend, Henry Bancroft, built the cabin that now stands in ruins just off the old Big Oak Flat Road. They lived in the original cabin that



Curtin's Gin Flat cabin, in good condition in the early 1930's, is now in ruins.

was on the premises that has long since disappeared.

Apparently there was much activity around Gin Flat during the summer months when the Curtin Family was there. The Curtin's were well known and loved all through the Southern Mines and mountains. It has been mentioned that Governor Jim Budd often stopped at Gin Flat, also a number of hunters used the flat as a base camp, no doubt partaking of the Curtin's fine hospitality. In 1901, just prior to the time that the railroad came into El Portal, the Tamarack Lodge cabin was purchased by young John Curtin and moved to Gin Flat and attached to the 1882 cabin. These two cabins, now in ruins, may be seen today at Gin Flat. It was just a few years later that the Curtins moved from the area, since cattle and sheep were banned from Yosemite National Park.

As to the origin of the name Gin Flat, Robert A. Curtin, a brother of John B. Curtin, states that when the first freight teams came over the old Big Oak Flat road, presumably heading for Yosemite Valley, a barrel of

gin fell from the wagon, unknown to the driver. A group of cowboys, sheepmen, and road workers found it and promptly had a celebration honoring the occasion. They became gloriously "ginned up" as a result, the affair becoming well enough known to establish the name for all times.

A photograph, acquired by the museum, labeled as Gin Flat, shows the cabin, evidently prior to the 1901 moving of the Tamarack Lodge cabin since there is only one cabin shown, and a large barn. This barn, and some other structures, have since disappeared leaving us with little evidence on the site itself.

Yosemite has many such flats. Many, no doubt, have interesting histories that have disappeared never to be uncovered again. Some of them have a ruined cabin to give mute testimony of one time activity. Many of these old sites make fascinating study, with only a line or two available here and there in widely scattered manuscripts. A feeling of personal kinship may be gained with just a little knowledge of this history of the land, and thus a great source of satisfaction.



El Capitan from old Coulterville Road.

—Ralph Anderson

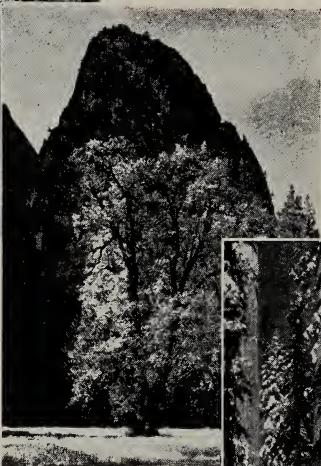
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